

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (23-8-1998 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

A fruitful bough

Genesis 49:1-28

Additional Bible reading: John 15:1-5

### Introduction

This section is the deathbed scene of Jacob. His dying words to his twelve sons are recorded. These words are sometimes called “The blessing of Jacob” – though blessing is not promised to every son. Jacob reviews the past and makes predictions (in light of the past) about the future. Jacob predicts the character of each of the tribes which spring from his sons. Subsequent history proved the truth of these predictions. We are going to look briefly at these predictions, then concentrate on Joseph.

### The predictions about the eleven sons

Reuben was the first-born, but because of his sin, Jacob predicts an unstable future for his tribe. **Turbulent as the waters, you will no longer excel** (Genesis 49:4). Sin would make the tribe of Reuben unreliable and unstable.

The brothers Simeon and Levi would be treacherous to their harmless and peaceful neighbours.

For Judah, Jacob predicted great glory in the future. David was descended from Judah, and also the Messiah was to come from him. Therefore he would bring blessing to the world. **Our Lord sprang out of Judah** (Hebrews 7:14). **The lion of the tribe of Judah** (Revelation 5:5).

Zebulun would dwell near the sea and provide haven for ships.

Isaachar was timid and weak. He did not exert himself, preferring an easy life.

Dan was like a serpent, always biting, causing trouble, cunning and deceitful.

Gad would experience pressure and hardship, but would overcome at the last.

Asher was full of promise and plenty.

Naphtali was living and active, and therefore would have a happy life.

Benjamin was compared to a wolf going after prey. He was the smallest tribe, but one of the most war-like. From him came King Saul.

So eleven sons, and the tribes descended from them, were discussed and their main characteristics, good and bad, were listed. The sons of Jacob are like beacons to us, as the Bible sets them forth. Beacons serve as guides and as warnings. The Scripture was written for our learning, to inspire us in what to imitate, and to warn us what to avoid.

## The twelfth son, Joseph

We are given two pictures of Joseph's character. They are wonderful pictures of strength, spiritual prosperity, fruitfulness and God's rich blessing. Spiritually we can be like Joseph as long as we learn his secret. We are going to start with a brief look at the second picture that is given, then spend longer on the first picture.

**With bitterness archers attacked him; they shot at him with hostility. But his bow remained steady, his strong arms stayed limber** (Genesis 49:23,24). His arms were made strong by the arms of God, the mighty God of Judah. He had a lot to put up with from his brothers and all the sufferings in Egypt. But he was strong in the Lord and overcame. God poured strength into him as his attackers tried feebly to destroy him. His enemies did not have one, but two to deal with. He who fights for God never fights without Him. God's strong hand grasps and enfolds our weakness, making us adequate for conflict and the demands of life.

The first picture says much the same thing, but in other words. **Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine near a spring, whose branches climb over a wall** (Genesis 49:22). Joseph is being compared to the branch of a fruit tree, planted by a well of water, and flourishing so much that it even sends shoots over the wall. We are going to look at the fruitful bough, the well (or spring), and the means whereby the well fed the bough, in closer detail.

## Joseph, the fruitful bough

The fruitful bough is a perfect picture of Joseph's life and character. He was pleasant and fruitful. Although he was sold as a slave, the Lord was with him and he prospered. He acted honourably in the house of Potiphar and did not fall into temptation. He proved competent and trustworthy in prison, and was given responsibility for the prisoners. Whatever he did, he prospered. He showed patience and kindness to his fellow prisoners. Then he became Prime Minister, and through his hard work and skill, he saved Egypt from famine. He was warm and forgiving to his brothers even though they had been so cruel and harsh to him. He was concerned for his aging father and the rest of his family, and provided lavishly for all of them. He was indeed a fruitful bough, so flourishing that he sent branches over the wall.

The New Testament equivalent is John 15, where Jesus speaks of the vine and the branches. The Christian is described as a branch placed in the vine. He is placed there to bear fruit – grapes. The Christian has been saved and placed in Christ Jesus that he may bear fruit. **You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last** (John 15:16). We were chosen, called, saved, given new life, and bear fruit.

Fruit is seen in our Christian character, and in our Christian service. Firstly, in Christian character - **The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control** (Galatians 5:22,23). Christian holiness reflects God's character, bears the image of Christ, the family likeness. In Christian service we bear fruit, as Paul did - **I planned many times to come to you in order that I might have a harvest among you** (Romans 1:13). Effective service bears fruit and produces a harvest. We win and build others up. Fruit is very

important. It is one of the proofs that the tree is alive. One of the proofs that we are spiritually alive and God has worked in our lives is that we bear fruit in our character and service. If Christ is in our heart, His presence must be seen. The Christian is not just someone who has signed up for something, or gone through a religious ceremony. He is a new person, leading to spiritual fruit.

We are not perfect, but we are not the people we once were. God is real to us now. Our faces are God-wards, and we want to please Him and be like Him and live for Him. "I am not what I ought, want or hope to be. But I am blessed by God. I am not the man I once was, and by the grace of God I am what I am." (John Newton) We have not arrived, but we are definitely on our way.

#### The reason for the bough's fruitfulness

The reason for the bough's fruitfulness was that it was planted by a well, or spring. This was its secret. It was not fruitful because of its own resources, but because it was by a source of water that fed it and supplied it. There is no question that the well that fed and nourished Joseph was God Himself. It was not a matter of family influence or will power or cleverness. It wasn't just that Joseph had pulled his socks up. **The Lord was with Joseph and he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master... The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the Lord was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did** (Genesis 39:2,23). "I cannot do it," Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires.".... "It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering." (Genesis 41:16,52). He told his brothers, **I fear God** (Genesis 42:18), and **it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you** (Genesis 45:5).

This was recognised by other people. Potiphar could see the difference in Joseph: **his master saw that the Lord was with him** (Genesis 39:3). And even Pharaoh knew the reason for Joseph's excellence: "**Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?**" (Genesis 41:38). It was not a question of willpower, heredity or upbringing – all of which are important – but above and beyond all else it was clear that the Lord was his "well" causing him to flourish.

How reminiscent of the Psalmist's description of the Godly man: **his delight is in the law of the Lord.... He is like a tree planted by streams of water** (Psalm 1:2,3). "**All my fountains are in You**" (Psalm 87:7). The prophet Isaiah used the same imagery: **The Lord will guide you always; You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail** (Isaiah 58:11). And the Lord said, **If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit** (John 15:5).

Throughout Scripture the Godly man is the one who lives in God, dwells in God, draws his spiritual life from God. He cannot be explained apart from God. So in the Epistles we read, **I can do everything through him who gives me strength** (Philippians 4:13), **I no longer live, but Christ lives in me** (Galatians 2:20).

Far too many Christians do not know anything about this. The resources available to the Christian remain largely unknown to many. They lean on their parent's faith, the atmosphere in the church, the support of Christian friends. They collapse when this

human support network is removed. They cannot cope in a hostile environment, for their faith is too shallow. Their bough is not being well watered and fed. They are not living and drawing on the Lord. Too many believe that if they just do their best, God will do the rest. Rather, they need to learn about the unsearchable riches of Christ, and dip deeply into His great sufficiency. The supplies in God are inexhaustible and constant. His grace abounds towards us all day and every day.

**The Lord confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them** (Psalm 25:14). We need to forget about ourselves and how able we are, and fix our eyes on Jesus. The power is in the Master, not in the servant; in the hand and not in the weapon; in the vine and not in the branch; in the well and not in the bough. In ourselves, we are bankrupt; in Him we are millionaires. **You may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God** (Ephesians 3:19). **Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus** (2 Timothy 2:1).

This was a discovery made by Hudson Taylor, which transformed his missionary service. These words were from a letter sent to him: “Not struggling and striving, but looking off to Him, trusting Him for present power... Coming to the edge of One who is boundless... Not striving after faith but resting on the Faithful One.” Hudson Taylor said that he learned to draw every farthing of his income from the Bank of Heaven.

#### The means whereby the well feeds the bough

We come to the practical aspect of this picture of Joseph. The bough and the well – how do the two come together? The bough has to send out little roots to the well. It cannot make itself fruitful, for it needs to be connected up to the source of grace and spiritual power.

As Christians, we only do that when we are totally convinced of our own utter weakness and helplessness. If we remain confident about ourselves, we are too strong for God to use. We must come to the end of ourselves, and utterly submit to Him. Paul had proved this when he wrote, **That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong** (2 Corinthians 12:10). When we become nothing, He can become everything. The minimum of us, and the maximum of Him. Weakness and infirmities do not debar us, but in fact they are the great qualification and condition for blessing. The more we despair of ourselves, the more God can be to us. Turning from self, we find all we need in Christ.

This means setting aside my plans, my will, my glory, my importance and my pride, and becoming totally His. As He takes over, He fills me with His grace and power. He becomes everything to me. My confidence is not in my own wit, wisdom or ability, but in His. When I stretch out an empty hand, He takes hold of it. I must be broken before I can be blessed. Then the water can flow from the well into the bough.

This attitude has to be maintained day by day. It is no good lighting a fire, and not keeping it fed. I must surrender myself today, and tomorrow, and the next day. Christ must be more than an acquaintance – He must be a companion, daily filling me with His Word, daily directing my actions and enabling me.

Are you aware that this connection with Him has been broken? Has some sin intervened? Put the matter right immediately. The lines of communication must be kept open. God does not give us a supply of spiritual strength to last a long time. We need to seek replenishment every day. Daily seek His face and renew your grip on His hand.

To be a fruitful bough is the potential of every life. We are all called to be men and women of God, living for Him, with Him, and on Him. Our personal relationship with Him is the most important thing – not the externals, but the inner relationship. Fierce winds are blowing round us nowadays, and we need to be anchored, bow and stern.